

Speak the language of tolerance

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The ushering in of the New Year this time was rather unique in that it coincided with one of Islam's most sacred moments - during Aidiladha or the Feast of Sacrifice, in conjunction with the annual pilgrimage or hajj.

It is an extra special occasion as Malaysia is also celebrating its 50 years of nationhood this year, and Aidiladha espouses the "spirit of sacrifice" as did those who fought for our independence.

In fact, historically, the sense of sacrifice that exudes from Aidiladha goes beyond any personal or national experiences. Rather, it is based on total devotion and selflessness, a value that is rare in today's world.

Yet, some 50 years ago, this was the exact value that shaped Malaya, and subsequently Malaysia, with the co-operation of Sabah and Sarawak.

So as we rejoice and celebrate our 50 years of *Merdeka*, we must always keep in mind the importance of such values, and strive hard to keep them alive, especially among the *post-Merdeka* generation.

Without the spirit of sacrifice, as nurtured by the previous generations, it may be difficult to see what Malaysia would look like today, what more 50 years on.

Already, despite the endless rhetoric, minor cracks are beginning to show because of the shortage of a critical mass of "doers" in defence of its multi-dimensional and diverse character.

Notably, there are not enough Malaysians, in particular those who have made enough gains, to reach out to the other less fortunate in the true spirit of sacrifice.

That is indeed how Aidiladha avails itself as the world's largest multi-dimensional and most diverse congregation to be assembled in any one place globally, immersed in nothing but total sacrifice.

It aims to convey a very simple fact of life-that the diverse human populations are created so that they can get to know one another and live in peace and harmony (multiculturalism).

And that they are all equal in the eyes of the Maker, except in matters that demand sacrifices leading to piety. One cannot get any more universal than this, bridging all religious beliefs.

In a God-conscious society such as Malaysia, given the first principle of Rukun Negara, this simple fact of life cannot but act as its cornerstone forward.

Hence, it came as no surprise when the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, who is also the custodian of Islam, was officiating at the national Christmas Open House.

While leaders of many nations and congregations are preoccupied with Islamophobia (a term reportedly coined in Britain in 1997 by the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia), Malaysia continues to demonstrate its tolerance for others-a proud hallmark of a nationhood coming of age.

In this context, one is pleasantly struck by a statement in a recent article (*Utusan Malaysia*, Dec 26), written by the vice-president of the Chinese Muslim Association of Malaysia:

"Inilah sikap accomodasi orang Melayu yang saya fikir patut dipuji dan jarang dijumpai pada orang lain. Jika tidak ada kompromi ini, saya fikir orang Cina tidak seperti seadanya pada hari ini." ("This spirit of accomodation among Malays should be praised and is seldom seen in other people. If not for this compromise, I feel the Chinese would not be what they are today")

Not only does the writer recognise the contribution of others, including the Chinese, his honest admission shows how deeply he appreciates the sense of sacrifice that makes the diversity possible.

Similarly, the prime minister's call in his Christmas message for unity in our diversity cannot be more timely.

It is a matter of building on the similarities that connect us and bridge the divide that separates us, urged the Prime Minister, reminding Malaysians never to forget that they shared the same future and destiny.

Like Aidiladha, it must be emphasised that Christmas too is about sacrifice, despite its different historical context. In the personality of Jesus, who is a prophet in Islam, the deep sense of sacrifice is unmistakably similar. In several accounts, the basic teachings of Jesus and Muhammad are one and the same, based on the common precepts of the Abrahamic faith.

Sadly, it was only later that some differences emerged through various re-interpretations. At times, it seems to become irreconcilable, taking a toll on multiculturalism, for instance.

Increasingly, our multicultural practices too slowly move away from the celebration of diversity.

It seems to degenerate into some socio-political agenda to debunk and question the agreed norms that were painfully put in place at least half a century ago. Instead of enriching similarities and common values, it seeks to subvert them.

Sometimes, this is done, hand-in-glove with some external forces, fuelled by selfish political expediencies.

Instead of strengthening the well-established social contract and norms, they want to renegotiate it; conveniently forgetting how much had gone into making it work in the first place.

Thus, it boggles the mind why the kris, as a national icon, suddenly became an issue. After all, the kris has long been embedded as part of the traditions of the Malay sultanate, the root of Malaysian society.

Over time, it has become from merely a dagger for the Malays to a national symbol of sovereignty.

Hence the ceremonial "kissing" of the kris is an integral part of undivided expression of love towards one's country.

As though this is not myopic enough, there are apologists who are quick to appease the call to remove or replace the so-called "offending" symbol.

Surely, the kris deserves to be defended just as much as Bok Mouse?

So as we embrace the 50th anniversary of nationhood, it is best that we do some soul-searching as to how much we have squandered the value of true sacrifice in the nation's journey into the future.

For this, the slogan "*jadikan pengorbanan satu kebiasaan* " ("let sacrifices become a normal occurrence") is perhaps what we need as a New Year resolution.

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